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Protest Objects: *Bricolage*, Performance and Counter Archaeology¹

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Introduction

We begin with the provocation that archaeology, with its interest in the material minutiae of lived life, is uniquely placed to understand social protest. We assume that protests are not exceptional events and that they are akin to ritual events, performances implicated within the “reproduction of power relations, the negotiation of ideologies, and the constitution of...community” (Inomata and Coben 2006, 16). Following Durkheim (1915), we also assume that these forms of social performance are actually constitutive of the social and are materialized through protest objects from petitions, placards and puppets to improvised projectiles. Moreover, just as Durkheim’s totemic objects were mediators and metaphors of social relationships, so protest objects perform comparable functions. One problem for the archaeologist is, first, that protest objects tend to end up as intangible because they frequently do not survive the event for which they were constructed or in which they were put to use. Second, protest objects are for the most part re-purposed or simply re-deployed objects: for example, the saucepans of the *cacerolazo* noise protests in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 2001 or the tents of the anti-capitalist Occupy protests in London, New York and elsewhere in 2011 or indeed the plastic water bottles cut and re-fashioned to make improvised tear-gas masks as seen in the anti-gentrification Taksim Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, Turkey in

¹ Tremlett’s research at the Occupy Democracy protest was generously funded by the Norwegian Research Council and was conducted as part of an international and interdisciplinary research project led by Professor Jone Salomonsen at the University of Oslo called ‘Re-Assembling Democracy: Ritual as Cultural Resource’. For more information see <http://www.tf.uio.no/english/research/projects/redo/>.

2013. Even if such objects do survive, it is difficult to determine their precise protest biographies (Kopytoff 1986). We maintain that it is precisely these hybrid, *ad hoc* objects and the mediations they make between social groups and places that must be the focus of any counter-archaeology. We begin with an ethnographic *vignette* from an Occupy Democracy protest in Parliament Square in London in October 2014 focusing on the iconoclastic destruction of protest objects by so-called Heritage Wardens before moving on to discuss the ‘Disobedient Objects’ exhibition held at the Victoria and Albert Museum (Flood and Grindon 2014). Then, we mobilize Lévi-Straus’s notion of *bricolage* as a theory of production to approach protest objects as hybrid entities in hybrid spaces before turning to the idea of ‘performance’ to argue for a reflexive counter archaeology that begins with heritage as on-going relationships among peoples, places and things.

Occupy Democracy and ‘Disobedient Objects’

On the afternoon of October 17, 2014, Occupy activists gathered in Westminster, London, for what was planned to be a week-long occupation of Parliament Square (figure 1). A general election was on the horizon (it was held on 7 May the following year) while 15 October was the anniversary of the establishment of the Occupy London camp outside St Paul’s Cathedral and indeed the occupation of more than 900 urban sites in more than eighty countries by the wider Occupy movement. The protest was organized by veterans of the Occupy London camp seeking not only to mark the third anniversary of the global wave of Occupy protests they had been a part of, but also to perform some experiments in democracy through the staging of a series of debates with politicians, celebrities, activists, academics and others about issues such as austerity, fracking and the future of democracy itself. These debates were characterized by the expression and discussion of perspectives typically unrepresented

in mainstream media and politics. Nevertheless, they unfolded in a manner familiar to liberal political traditions: a speaker made an evidence-based argument and a public had the opportunity to discuss, contest, reject or modify the points made by the speaker.

Activists had hoped that they would be allowed to stage their protest and the various events they had planned on the grass in the centre of Parliament Square, although they knew that this would bring them into confrontation with the Police and Heritage Wardens. However, they had hoped that their peaceful, time-limited protest would be allowed to proceed without interference. Activists did spend a few hours on the grass on the Friday night, though by Saturday morning they had been confined to a narrow strip of pavement on the south side of the square and to a narrow, raised grass area running down its eastern side, where they remained—precariously—for six more days.

Our concern is with the actions of the Police and Heritage Wardens the following day. At that time, activists were waiting to be joined by what had been rumoured to be a sizeable contingent of ‘black bloc’ anarchists and Kurdish activists after a large Trades Union Council (TUC) march through central London. While they waited, the Heritage Wardens—accompanied by Police—circled the fringes of the protest seizing unguarded placards and banners and destroying them. These actions continued throughout the morning and afternoon, leading later to the destruction of two large ‘towers’ brought to the Square by activists who had carried them there from the TUC demonstration to the Square (figure 2). These acts of destruction were justified legally on the basis that while the protestors in Parliament Square had the right to protest, they did not have the right to do so with accompanying forms of material culture such as banners, tents, placards, tarpaulins, camp chairs or specifically, anything that might be viewed as a ‘structure’. The Police and Heritage Wardens were enforcing the so-called ‘Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act’ of 2011 (which was

amended by the ‘Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act’ of 2014). The use of these pieces of legislation in the policing of the Occupy Democracy protest has been well-documented in independent and official media (see Graeber 2014; Perraudin 2014; Ram 2014; Rikki 2014).² While it is beyond the scope of this article to comment on the legislation itself, it is certainly the case that while the legislation is quite explicit about what it seeks to forbid—activists sustaining protests for long periods using tents and other structures to protect themselves from the weather—it certainly is not clear that the legislation empowers either Police or Heritage Wardens to seize or destroy placards, banners or towers, none of which would be much use to persons seeking to shield themselves from wind, rain, sunshine or snow (Home Office 2014). In addition, it is worth noting that protest objects are by no means always treated this way: in 2008, English Heritage in tandem with the Peak District National Park commissioned a team of archaeologists to document the Lees Cross and Endcliffe protest camp because of the camp’s implication in the history of the landscape that the protestors had sought to preserve from quarrying (see Badcock and Johnston, 2009).

In previous research on Occupy camps in London and Hong Kong my work (Tremlett 2012; 2016) involved discourse analysis of official and independent media sources combined with interviews and workshop-style discussions with activists. Likewise, when I arrived at Parliament Square in the late afternoon of 17 October, I was for the most part focused on what people were saying: for example, in my field notes I quote Russell Brand who spoke during the afternoon of the 18 October alongside Natalie Bennett (then leader of the Green Party) and John McDonnell and Michael Meacher (at the time, both were backbench, left-

² Anna Feigenbaum (2014) details a trial around Occupy Fort Meyers in America where the Court ruled that while ‘fake sleeping’ was “an acceptable mode of communicative protest...real sleeping was not” (Feigenbaum 2014, 19). The Fort Meyers camp had been established in the city’s park and the ruling meant that while protest with a tent in the park was legal, actually using the tent for the purposes of sleeping was not.

wing Labour MPs: at the time of writing John McDonnell is shadow Chancellor while Michael Meacher sadly passed away on 21 October the following year). Brand said that he had been in Zucotti Park in New York during the Occupy protests, and claimed that “politics, economics and spirituality” had come together in the Zucotti camp “for the first time since the 1960s”. Certainly, one of the areas I have been interested in is conjunctions of religion, spirituality and politics. But, it was not until sometime later that I realized that neither what people had said nor the distinctive but already well documented use of horizontal process—also known as pre-figurative politics³—by the Occupy Democracy protestors to frame decision-making practices was as significant as the iconoclastic destruction of protest material culture that happened by and large at the fringes of the protest. The destruction of these objects by ‘Heritage Wardens’ took place without irony at a site a very short walk from the Palace of Westminster which was recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 1987.⁴ It was an attempt to maintain the purity of officially sanctioned heritage culture as the primary mediator of British political culture through the violent elimination of potential rivals.

We should perhaps pause at this juncture to reflect briefly on the term ‘heritage’ and the idea of the ‘Heritage Warden’. Heritage typically refers to places or objects that are regarded as special in some way by national and/or trans-national bodies and groups. The institutionalization of a uniformed corps known as Heritage Wardens who work in Parliament Square and who are trained primarily in security rather than say, archaeology or museum studies, implies the idea that heritage exists—at least within the confines of Parliament

³ Activists describe pre-figurative politics as a form of political association, action or structuring that anticipates the kind of society that they want to create (see Graeber 2013).

⁴ Many of the speeches and discussions were livestreamed and recorded by activists themselves and can be accessed at <http://occupydemocracy.org.uk/>.

Square—as a fixed and already determined quantity that must be guarded and protected. But following Harrison (2013), heritage may be tangible but may equally be intangible or relational and indeed may refer as much to the on-going processes by which heritage is produced and/or legitimated and the spaces in which it is enacted. What then does it mean when uniformed men and women designated as Heritage Wardens operate in tandem with Police to seize and destroy protest objects when, arguably, the protest, the protestors and their material culture are no more nor less ‘heritage’ than anything else in Parliament Square? If the iconoclastic destruction of protest objects at the Occupy Democracy protest points to the attempt to maintain the monumental purity of official heritage culture through the destruction of these other material forms of social mediation, the ‘Disobedient Objects’ exhibition was an attempt to explore the active and animate qualities of these objects but within the controlled if not indeed cryogenic environment of the museum.

The ‘Disobedient Objects’ exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum ran from 26 July 2014 to 1 February 2015 and received a number of favourable reviews in the mainstream press (for example, see Sadler 2014; Wainwright 2014; Waters 2014). The exhibition included objects that had been used in a number of protests from around the world and which had been donated to the curators by a wide range of individuals and groups. The exhibition curators were well aware of the possibility that displaying these objects might be akin to freezing them. They wrote, in the exhibition catalogue, of the potential of the “museum as mausoleum” (Flood and Grindon 2014, 20) and of the danger of the objects being severed from the deep “ecologies composed also of other objects, music, performing bodies, technology, laws, organizations and affects” (2014: 15) through their re-contextualization in the museum display. To be sure, re-contextualization can be an occasion for generating new meanings and significances as much as it can be a site of cryogenic suspension (or indeed the

imposition of a hegemonic narrative on otherwise potentially subversive material). In the late nineteenth century, some anthropologists saw museums as the discipline's primary drivers of research because primitive cultures seemed to be turning to dust on contact with a corrosive outside world. Anthropologists would preserve, catalogue and display their finds in order to maintain a permanent record of humankind's disappearing cultures (Fabian 2014). There was certainly a *frisson* in an exhibition of objects that had been conceived precisely to resist the kinds of cartographic knowledge implicated in the catalogues and in exhibitions of colonial power. Nevertheless, walking between the different zones of the 'Disobedient Objects' exhibition space—'Direct Action', 'Speaking Out', 'Making Worlds', 'Solidarity' and 'A Multitude of Struggles'—it was possible to imagine that we were looking back on the strange performances or ritual practices of remote and exotic others. In the hallowed secular security of the Victoria and Albert—the great Temple to the treasures of Empire—we were looking not at living objects but fetishes, de-mystified by the light of the catalogue. According to the curators

History is inevitably a matter of selective inclusion. This is equally true of the objects of art and design history, whose collection is most often shaped by a market of wealthy collectors, even as some critical artists, curators and historians have attempted to intervene within the field. In that inevitable taking of sides, our project turns to objects that open up histories of making from below. These objects disclose hidden moments in which, even if only in brief flashes, we find the possibility that things might be otherwise: that, in fact, the world may also be made from below, by collective, organized disobedience against the world as it is (Flood and Grindon 2014, 8).

The explicit framing of the exhibition as a “history of design told from below” (Roth 2014, 136) opened out, according to the curators, interesting opportunities for “institutional critique” (Flood and Grindon 2014, 19) while their framing of the protest object as a design object was intended to foreground protest as a creative process (see also Graeber 2007). This was design history re-written as a history of Lévi-Straussian *bricolage* (see Tremlett 200,: 75-6), of “promiscuous resourcefulness, [and] ingenuity” (Flood and Grindon 2014, 12), as these improvised objects were fabricated from local social movements and their traditions of political resistance and of working with objects. This was certainly a quite radical intervention into the hallowed spaces of the Victoria and Albert Museum. The exhibition’s privileging of the authorless *ad hoc* over a more conservative aesthetic, combined with the stated intention to display these objects according to their “political efficacy” rather than their “formal qualities” (2014: 24) indicated the possibility of shifting the classification of design objects more generally away from the genealogies of authorship and aesthetics and towards the exploration of the objects as being, somehow, still alive (and capable of disobedience). These tensions—of display and death versus agency and de- and re-contextualization, but also of a universal history of design versus a multitude of local histories of *bricolage*—were not there to be resolved, of course. Rather, it was precisely the friction of these anticipations and assumptions that made the exhibition such a provocative space.

Towards *Bricolage* and Performance

Much of the archaeology of protest has focused on military sites implicated in the Cold War. For example, work has been undertaken on the archaeology of the Greenham Common protests camp in Greenham, England (Schofield 2009) and on the peace camps in Nevada in the USA (Beck, Schofield and Drollinger 2009). Implicated in the archaeology of protest

could also be the archaeology of riots, which performs similar functions but with a shorter duration (see Dixon 2013). There are also studies of contemporary ecological protests such as that of Badcock and Johnston (2009) at the site of Stanton Lees, Derbyshire. Here in 1999 a camp was established within a landscape rich with prehistoric and historic archaeology including the iconic Nine Ladies stone circle, to protest against the proposed reopening of the Stanton Lees and Endcliffe quarries. The protestors lived on the site for a period of ten years, creating a place for community out of recycled materials, including shelters or ‘benders’ made using tree branches and re-fashioned materials such as corrugated sheeting and wooden pallets (Badcock and Johnston 2009, 311). Analysis of the site of the Stanton Lees protest camp, as well as of other protest sites such as Greenham Common, was undertaken using conventional archaeological survey methodologies. This provided a way of recording the physical traces of sites of protest that are, by their nature, transient and produced through a kind of *bricolage*—not just in the production of protest objects such as ‘benders’—but also in the generation of ‘fluid landscapes’, places that are never finished but through the continual conjoining of old and new materials over time in a single place are in a state of constant flux (Aldred 2012, 70). Stanton Moor, for example, is a landscape that incorporates traces of prehistoric activity and post-medieval and modern industry to the extent that it is now almost impossible to separate the two in the archaeological imagination (Schofield 2010, 193). Importantly, the actions and processes of protest draw on the residual remains of these pasts to combine new forms of materiality in the present, in which the multiplicity of past landscapes is central. Here the concept of *bricolage* provides connections between older material presences and objects and the types of entanglements and assemblages of things, people and places taking place within the temporality and residuality of the contemporary landscape. *Bricolage*, as formulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss (see Tremlett 2008), constitutes a

theory of production that does not privilege the author, artist or artisan but rather the *ad hoc* combinations and re-combinations that disclose the fluidities—as opposed to essences—of culture:

...*bricolage* allows us to establish concrete connections between what we might call residual things in a landscape that continue to have material presence, with those things that are possible subjects for *fresh* transformation and alteration in their use through transition from one assemblage to another (Aldred 2012: 69).

Here, heritage is not defined in terms of specific objects but emerges from the juxtapositioning of groups, individuals, places and things, to create forms of heritable culture that are neither fixed nor inherent, and which can be understood as elements of processes in which both past and future emerge from the confrontations between multiple subjects and objects (Harrison 2015). Heritage is not a thing in need of protection, but an action and a resource that can be used by people (Stylaniou-Lambert *et al.* 2015: 178). The on-going interplay of protest and social space generates multi-layered sites constituted through objects and events through which different social groups establish themselves and their relationships to particular places.

Bricolage does not just play only into the production of protest objects and protest sites, but also into the display of protest material. We have already seen that the material culture of protest is often made from refashioned materials, which, in the Lévi-Straussian model, are created through the *ad hoc* recombination of cultural elements by individuals acting within a limited range of options (Liebmann 2013, 29). Pre-existing materials are re-packaged and reused for new ends and purposes. Recently Tlili (2016) has compared the museographer to the *bricoleur*, arguing that the life of an exhibition is created from a heterogeneous repertoire of materials which have been lifted from their local and historical

milieux, a combination of elements assembled not with the view of performing a particular project, but an umpteenth-hand combination of previous cultural assemblages to produce something new (Tlili 2016, 459). Here, the museographic assemblage is about recomposing past, present, and future, in which protest is understood not as a fixed or essential social act but as process that can challenge essentialist constructions of culture and power (Harvey 2016: 110). The framing of the museum curator as Lévi-Straus's *bricoleur* is also a provocation for an archaeology of protest seeking to break from the strictures of Western rationalism precisely because it highlights the hybridity of culture.

Compared to the sites at Stanton Moor and Greenham Common, the location of the Occupy Democracy protest offers a different perspective for archaeologists interested in protest. Parliament Square is a complex site as it can function as a traditional locale for the performance and display of national identity and, due to its location near the Houses of Parliament, Whitehall, the Supreme Court and the Palace of Westminster, it is also a place where institutions and government can be petitioned and called to account through acts of protest and disobedience (Pálsson 2012, 568). One way of approaching Parliament Square as a site is through Joseph Roach's concept of a 'vortex of behaviour' (Roach 1996), a place of social interactivity where people enact performances in order to retain, gain or counter the status attributed to the place and the social practices with which it is associated.

Performance is a wide-ranging and debated term incorporating a spectrum of activities, at the heart of which is the dichotomy between performance as daily life on one hand, and, on the other, performance as a specially marked out mode of action. For the latter, Richard Schechner's view of performance as 'twice-behaved behaviours' (Schechner 1993) and Eugenio Barba's concept of 'extra-daily' performance (Barba 1995) consider performance as an action or series of actions, distinct from the everyday, marked out by

special types of behaviour and manifest in scheduled events which are spatially and temporally bound (Pearson 1998, 33). In these cases, performance works ontologically, rather than epistemologically—when something ‘is’ performance, rather than something viewed ‘as’ performance. Other scholars see performance as a social activity, which involves ordinary behaviour: phenomena which are not performances in the conventional sense of the word, including the aesthetics of everyday life, from food to fashion (Franklin 2001: 218). These include scholars such as Erving Goffman (1959) and Ian Hodder (2006), who associate social actions of everyday life with performance or, in Hodder’s words, performance is defined ‘as a showing and a looking’ (2006, 82). Here performance functions epistemologically, a methodological lens that enables scholars to analyse events (such as civic obedience, resistance, gender, sexual identity, ethnicity) *as* performance, in so far as they are actions which require daily rehearsal and enactment (Taylor 2002, 45). In this sense performance is a concept, a way of understanding.

With these definitions in mind, we see performance as a key methodological assumption of a reflexive counter-archaeology, as an act of transfer, responsible for transmitting social and historical knowledge not merely through vertical or hierarchical routes of learning but also along horizontal lines of transmission in which protestors and archaeologists are implicated (Taylor 2002, 44). In regard to protest, performance can be considered both ontologically and epistemologically—through performance, not only is the epistemological realm of meaning and truth created, but social reality, the ontological realm, can itself be created through performance. Performance is therefore a site of negotiation.

With regard to the gathering of 17 October 2014 at Parliament Square, we envisage it as such a performance through which different actors (the protestors, the Heritage Wardens but also other publics including tourists) displayed for others the meaning of their social

situation (Alexander 2004, 259). Such protests also fall under what Randall Collins (2001) has characterized as ‘high ritual density’, in which the bodily practices of large groups of participants amplify emotion and transfer it into a sense of collective solidarity (see also Durkheim 1915). With protest action, a diverse field of emotional experiences including long periods of boredom as well as moments of intense anticipation, confrontation and confusion, contributes to this affective assemblage (Juris 2015). The material elements of the protest also have a part to play in this. The symbols and emblems of the group encapsulate memories of collective participation and help in the continuation of the movement, by allowing people to renew their feelings of dedication when away from the group, or by initiating new collective gatherings at new occasions (Collins 2001, 28). This remains the case even as the new social media play an increasingly important role in mobilizing publics for protest: for example, protests are increasingly livestreamed, opening them to new forms of cognitive and affective participation as well as generating new virtual archaeological sites for excavation and analysis.

To use performance as a methodological tool to interpret protests and protest material culture also involves a consideration of how the protestors use public space, and in particular how the physical and conceptual features of the landscape are drawn upon to create new meanings and new heritages.

At Parliament Square, protestors gathered to participate in debates and discussions and temporarily to occupy the grass in the centre of Parliament Square at one level as a means of performing their demand for recognition from the state. But the performance, as a reiteration of shared and contested norms, also played off the meanings inscribed into the built environment, which in turn was brought into being through other performances notably around conceptions of ‘national heritage’ (Gregson and Rose 2000, 441). At Parliament

Square, practices of protest were performed in juxtaposition with some of the iconic landmarks of the capital, allowing the participants to create new temporary spaces within London's monumental urban landscape and to create, even if only temporarily, alternative sites of heritage.

To return to Roach, such 'vortices of behaviour' are created through technological (usually architectural) innovation and social organization, and their function is to channel specified needs or habits in order to reproduce them (Roach 1996, 27). The specific location of Parliament Square brought Occupy London into a range of conflicts with the ordinary functions of the area as a vortex of political and legal as well as touristic behaviours (Nyong'o 2012). As such, the *bricolage* produced here did not draw on either prehistoric or historical landscape features such as those found at Stanton Lees, or even Greenham Common, which has a notable history as the location for a Second World War airbase. Instead it drew upon the heritage culture materials of 'the establishment' to create new forms of dynamic heritage which aimed to counter the prevalent narratives of political authority historically associated with the space.

Conclusions

In this paper we have used an ethnographic *vignette* of the iconoclastic destruction of protest objects at an Occupy Democracy protest that took place in London in the autumn of 2014, and some reflections on the 'Disobedient Objects' exhibition that was held at the Victoria and Albert Museum that took place over six months through 2014-15, to sketch the contours of a reflexive counter archaeology concerned with protest and specifically to begin to theorize protest objects and protest spaces in terms of *bricolage* and performance. Looking back at the protest and the exhibition has provided a useful vantage point from which to reflect on

previous archaeological analyses of protest, *ad hoc* materials, hybrid culture and the centrality of objects in mediating the social. The Occupy Democracy camp was much less accessible for conventional archaeological survey methods than previous protest camps such as those held at Stanton Moor or Greenham Common, partly due to the highly mobile nature of the protest but also due to its location at an urban site controlled and patrolled by ‘wardens’ of the state. However, by framing the protest and the site in terms of *bricolage* and performance, it becomes possible to access and read the material culture of the protest and the destruction of protest objects by so-called Heritage Wardens as the subversion of the monumental materiality of the site and to start to interrogate the functions of the protest objects as mediators and as translators of social groups, places and things. According to David Graeber, protest objects from towers to banners to giant puppets are a “mockery of the idea of a monument” and of the idea of “permanence” (2007, 382). But importantly, by using the concepts of *bricolage* and performance, counter-archaeology does not simply record the protest but becomes a part of the process through which new knowledge is generated and transmitted, and new research sites—such as the virtual worlds of social media—are constituted for archaeological investigation. Most importantly of all, it works with the theoretical resources that allow it to interrogate the violence of monumental objects and those that have been assigned to guard them, and as such it is able to tune into the quotidian and recycled objects of protest and of ordinary life and in so doing, able to develop a deeper understanding of the social processes of protest and power in common with the perspectives of corollary disciplines including sociology and social anthropology.

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